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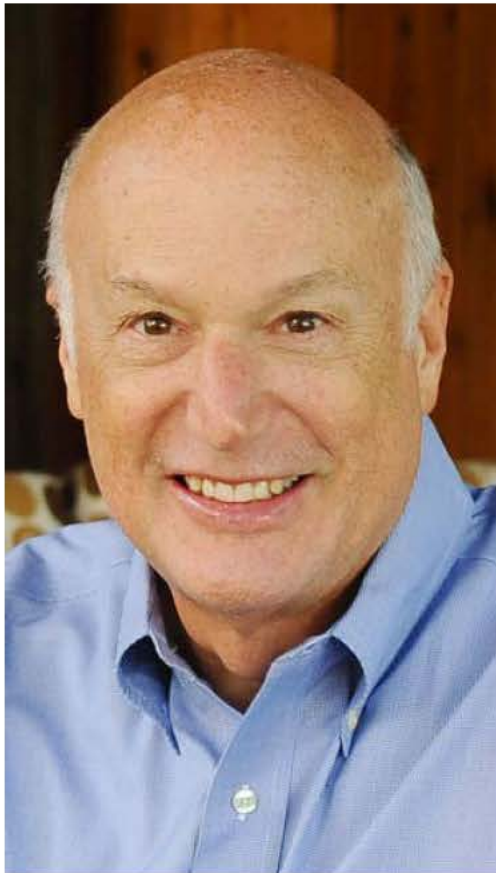
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Include Superfund site in Harvey relief efforts

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Posted: Friday, September 15, 2017 12:00 am

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We expect some basic things from government: most people agree that protection from enemies, both foreign and domestic describes one key role. We have spent huge amounts to fight foreign enemies, but combating the problems we face at home does not come easy for Austin or Washington, and our community hurts because of it.

I'm not talking about more funds for firefighters, police, and teachers, though they need it. I'm also not talking about ensuring that we can all find affordable healthcare that gives us comprehensive coverage and does not threaten financial ruin.

I'm talking about the invisible problems that we live with. Poisons emitted by industry to our air, water, and soil that can be controlled in normal conditions but have been made exponentially worse by natural disasters like Hurricane Harvey where they cause harm to our families, reduce our property values, and make us all less healthy and prosperous.

Stop and ask yourself: Should we be surprised that Superfund sites like the San Jacinto Waste Pits flooded during Hurricane Harvey and spread their pollution onto nearby people, the river and the bay?

The storm was predictable and so are the results. Our protection system, the EPA and state regulators, have made decisions over the years that have allowed industry to save money at the cost of putting our community and people at risk. Harvey has made that "hypothetical" risk a reality and has poisoned our community.

Rather than sit idly while Washington and Austin continue to let the poisons linger in our water, we should be demanding that these flooded sites be cleaned as a

part of the Hurricane Harvey relief effort.

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The San Jacinto Pits, containing uncontrolled dioxin (a very toxic and persistent poison) wastes, has been bogged down in a regulatory morass for almost 20 years while the appropriate method of cleanup was studied and debated, and liability for costs was litigated and assigned to the polluters.

During this time, everyone knew that our area, with the San Jac Pits and 40 other Superfund sites, 13 of which that also flooded during Harvey, was likely to experience hurricanes and flooding that could spread the pollution and expose more people to danger. After all, destructive hurricanes hit our coast on average every 15 years.

Congress and our state lawmakers must act now to make protection of the people and cleanup of these vulnerable sites a priority. We must demand that disaster recovery funds be allocated to begin this process immediately. Our lawmakers know that even after a site is designated a Superfund site, cleanup can take decades.

For sites like the San Jac Pits, waiting for the process to inch along has real life consequences for communities. With immediate attention, cleanup can be accomplished in a few years. Recovering the costs from the polluters can and should take place; but that process is slower and that can be done once the public is protected.

I'm a geologist and an environmental and risk management consultant, so I understand the problem and know the solution.

If our leaders, who are charged with the responsibility of domestic protection, really want to help make America great, they can start by taking immediate steps to resolve the current situation and clean up the mess caused by Harvey.

Just as important, they need to address the likely recurrence of this mess by requiring industry and other parties responsible for the pollution to have realistic and enforceable contingency plans and systems in place where predictable natural hazards can overwhelm protections that would be adequate under normal conditions. That would protect us from serious harm to our people and communities.

We have the opportunity to make it happen, but only if we demand that flooded Superfund sites are included in the Harvey relief efforts. We also must demand that our leaders use this as a learning event where they will modify the requirements on other sites to avoid a similar situation in the future. That is the only way to force our leaders in Washington and Austin to do their job to protect us from domestic problems – problems literally in our own backyard.

Jon Powell is a geologist and former mayor of Taylor Lake Village.



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Posted in Guest columns on Friday, September 15, 2017 12:00 am.

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